



Our Future can be Found in Bioprospecting

So – what is Bioprospecting and why is it important to Australia. Bioprospecting is searching for naturally occurring chemical compounds, genes or other parts of organisms that have potential economic value. These naturally found ingredients have the greatest economic benefits when they are used in commercial products, such as pharmaceuticals, chemicals and food additives.

Australia is internationally recognised as a ‘hot spot’ in biodiversity. An extremely large proportion of our animals and plants can only be found in Australia. These Australian animals and plants are also rich in compounds that can be used within commercial products. Yet, the risk for us is that while we can identify the commercial properties of species we do not have the capabilities to produce the end product.

The House of Representatives Primary Industries and Regional Services Committee will investigate the regional development of bioprospecting industries. The economic benefits for value adding of natural products is in the commercialisation and production stages, not in the initial collecting and screening. The House Committee wants to determine Australia’s capabilities to manufacture biota products and achieve economic gains from the production stages.

“Australia has the skill and facilities to bioprospect, but it has not capitalised on the value-added component of biota materials – that is the manufacturing and processing of the materials into end products,” Chair of the House Primary Industries and Regional Services Committee, Fran Bailey explained. “This means that Australia could lose millions in the manufacturing of pharmaceuticals and other products. As in the majority of cases production is undertaken by multi-national organisations based offshore and more often than not we do not see the financial rewards.

“Through this Bioprospecting Inquiry, we need to consider ways in which the Australian Governments can develop strategic partnerships with business and investors so that Australia can obtain the due financial rewards for sourcing the primary material,” Ms Bailey added.

“Other countries that are also rich in biota, such as South American countries, have developed international guidelines for the multinational manufacturers so that the local communities and in particular the local indigenous communities, receive the financial recognition for sourcing the original ingredients. Australia needs to develop similar controls. We have done this randomly in the past in Western Australia (Conservation and Land Management Department) and more recently in Queensland, but it isn’t a standard.”

The Bioprospecting Inquiry will also focus on protecting our intellectual knowledge. It is believed that if Australian communities receive the recognition for sourcing and identifying the primary ingredient then it will help to protect our intellectual knowledge.

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“If mechanisms aren’t in place soon to protect our intellectual property rights and knowledge in biota areas then it is feasible that within five years Australia’s biota could be screened and sold off and the financial benefits won’t be kept in Australia,” Ms Bailey said.

“The environment must also be considered and we must ensure that bioprospecting is done sensitively and that the local environment is respected and not damaged due to efforts to locate species. We must also have mechanisms in place that ensures species don’t become endangered.”

For more details on the Bioprospecting Inquiry and for copies of the terms of reference visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind or contact the Committee Secretary, Ian Dundas, on 02 6277 4500.

For Media Comment contact Fran Bailey, Chair of the House Primary Industries and Regional Services Committee, 0419 583 647 or 02 6277 4280.

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